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ABSTRACT

Informed opinion suggests that problems of underachievement in school relate to the lack of particular kinds of experience, discontinuity between school and home, and linguistic and cultural diversity. If a literacy program were based on up-to-date knowledge of the processes involved in reading and writing, and what is known of early literacy events that provide a successful entry into reading and writing for many children, a program could be developed in which reading aloud would be the central factor. An emergent reading model might follow: (1) children build up a repertoire of books and stories, (2) bridge spoken and written language, (3) explore environmental language, (4) develop concepts of print, (5) try 'reading' and 'writing' themselves, (6) get to know some words and letters, (7) develop a literacy set. If concern for underachieving children is real, it is necessary for teachers to examine their practice at the beginning of school and create conditions that allow a point of entry to children from different social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It is also important to move away from trivializing literacy by reducing it to skills learning, improve the quality and range of books and stories offered to children, and provide more opportunities for children to transform, extend and reformulate ideas and experience. (NKA)

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The Problem of Underachievement in School

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The Problem of Underachievement in School

When we think of underachievement in school, particular youngsters come to mind - slow learners, those who score low on tests, the inattentive, the troublesome, and the inarticulate, many of whom are poor readers and writers. Their difficulties have been attributed to causes such as lack of experience, physical and health problems (the numbers seem to mount each year), linguistic and cultural diversity, and general discontinuity between school and home. A great deal of public concern and professional attention has been focused on making provision for many of these children.

My present concern extends beyond this recognised educational problem to include the concealed underachievement pervading classrooms and schools, that prevents too many children from achieving anything like their full potential as learners, and sometimes as human beings. Many bright children find they can satisfy the requirements of the school with very little real effort. Average learners get by with repetitive pre-formulated learning, often verbally transmitted by the teacher and practised in work-books and exercises. Children who are slow to learn for whatever reason, and find reading and writing difficult, are most at risk in school. Their self-esteem, and confidence in their ability to learn diminishes as they increasingly face demands for reading and writing in areas of the curriculum. For them, as for many others, there is often little opportunity

to learn through other non-literacy abilities or to develop their own special interests and talents.

Yet, we know that schools can and do make a difference in children's lives, in what they can learn and how they feel about learning. A most recent report (1986) THE JUNIOR SCHOOL PROJECT, a four year longitudinal study carried out by the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA), addressed the question of school effectiveness. The key questions were:

1. Are some schools or classes more effective than others when variation in the intake of pupils is taken into account?
2. Are some schools effective for particular groups of children?
3. If some schools are more effective than others, then what factors contribute to these positive effects?

Their findings stated emphatically that schools do make a difference and the difference is substantial and that schools that were effective in promoting progress with one group of children tended to be effective for children in any other group.

Among the many factors that contributed to the greater effectiveness of schools were:

- where teachers provided a well-organised framework for learning yet allowed children some freedom within this structure
- where the teaching was intellectually challenging

These two factors have particular significance in that teachers recognise the value of allowing children some initiative in learning, and that the teachers involved had positive attitudes to children's ability to learn and offered them more than the obvious school routines. Many of us thinking back to our school days can pinpoint teachers who inspired and challenged us, and opened the way to learning and interests that have lasted throughout the years.

Many schools have endeavoured to help underachievers by increasing the range and quality of the experiences offered. Provision has been made for children with physical and health problems. Attention has been given to revising goals and procedures to facilitate the learning of children from diverse cultures and linguistic backgrounds. According to Gordon Wells (1986b) discontinuities between home and school are experienced to some extent by all children because of the special role of the school to educate. The differences are greater and more traumatic for those children whose home culture and language is furthest removed from the school.

A chief concern of school is literacy and it is in this area that children who are slower to learn are most vulnerable. What is meant by achievement in literacy? The concepts change over time. Traditionally, literacy in school meant reading and writing, often at minimal levels. Such low competence does not adequately serve young people in the modern world. Heath, an

anthropologist studying the growth and uses of literacy historically and culturally shows that successful literacy is rooted in culture and entails taking part in community life, that is, in literacy events that have purpose and meaning within the social/cultural group. Literacy flourishes where it has purpose and value for those who use it. This knowledge makes us pause and wonder whether some children in school fail in literacy because school reading and writing tasks often serve no real purpose that children can discern.

Since reading and writing are language is it useful to look at continuities between learning to talk and learning to read and write in some cultures.

All children learn language, that is they learn to make and receive meanings in their own cultural and linguistic communities. We know from the work of researchers such as Halliday (1975), Cazden (1979), and Wells (1981), that optimum conditions for developing language occur when children's initiatives are acknowledged and their interests shared with someone who listens and responds, who collaborates in making and negotiating meaning. In a social context, children learn to use language to organise, reflect on, and communicate their thinking, their feelings and their experience.

> It is the art of formulating one's thoughts and feelings in order to communicate them to others that is the strongest spur to actively seeking to understand them.
>
> Wells, 1986 p.107

In other words young learners construct their own knowledge, their own understandings, as they try to make sense of their experience in collaboration with those around them.

All children learn to talk, and some children learn to read before school. Most children in literate cultures have some knowledge of written language learned from the print in their environment and from any experiences they have had with books. There is real evidence of children's exploration of written language in the environment. (Harste, Woodward, and Burke)(1984), how, in attempting to write their own messages, they explore ways of understanding the writing system, (Ferreiro and Teberovsky (1982) and Clay (1975), and how, when they become aware of the alphabetic system they use whatever knowledge they have to invent their own spellings. (Read 197). Children, very much aware of the literate behaviours and events they see around them, make greetings cards, write letters, make books, shopping lists, messages, etc., before they can write in any conventional sense, and in so doing, demonstrate an understanding of the purpose of writing, and begin to learn how to do it.

Continuity in learning spoken and written language, and the most fundamental literacy learning is apparent in homes where parents share picture books and stories with their children. Through stories children become

aware of the pleasures and satisfactions to be found in books. They experience the symbolic power of language to create real and imaginary worlds. They meet written language forms and vocabulary beyond the language in daily use. Stories offer a framework for reflecting on and understanding their own behaviours and feelings, their own inner worlds of emotion and self-awareness. It is no accident that stories such as WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE, (Sendak) are in such demand by children. Sendak's story reflects their own inner worlds of good and bad behaviour, impotence in dealing with adults, assumed power, anger and hate, and also secure love and reconciliation.

Holdaway, (1979), sees such experience with picture story books as developing

> ....one of the primary linguistic skills entails the ability to interpret symbols of the imagination in such a way as to accurately perceive the reality being represented.
>
> p.164

Children's wide ranging interaction with adults and picture books provides rich experience in creating and interpreting images, of symbolic representation in words and pictures hence, a powerful entry to both literacy and learning. The significance of these pre-school literacy experiences in terms of achievement in literacy in school is increasingly being understood. Wells and Raban (1978), found that children, in their study who on entry to school, obtained higher scores in

the knowledge - of - literacy test, knew a great deal about books and stories because they had been read to by their parents. He found that this test best predicted overall achievement at age 7 and even at age 10. The 5 year old entrants showed real interest in the stories read to them, commenting and responding; they asked about the meaning of words, and displayed interest in some of the letters. They knew how to handle books. They were poised to learn more about reading and were coping well by the time they were 7-8 years old. By 10 years they were proficient readers, enjoying reading and generally able to be successful in curriculum areas.

Conversely, youngsters entering school with little book experience had greater difficulty learning to read and write. Because learning to read is given such high priority in the early years of schooling less successful youngsters are in danger of seeing themselves as poor learners with consequent loss to their self-esteem - and motivation to learn. Different cultures and groups within cultures have different values and uses for literacy. Shirley Brice Heath's study (1983) describes in detail the very different ways in which three adjacent communities in North America engaged in literacy events. Since cultural practices are diverse there is likely to be some variations in the book experience children have on entry to school. But, if we really understand the potential of stories and books for children's general

and literacy learning, we would surely make this knowledge central in our early literacy programmes. We would link into the stories children bring from their homes, for few children fail to hear everyday stories to do with family lives, the neighbourhood, the church to which they belong, and of course from television. Television is a common bond among the youngsters entering our schools. They play out Batman, the A Team, Knight Rider, showing real understanding of the characters and the plots just as they do of favourite books.

There is no doubt that underachievement begins in the earliest days in school if modes of teaching do not allow all children to find a way in to literacy. What school can do for all children is to enable them to know and enjoy stories, to learn that stories and books are sources of pleasure and satisfaction, that they can read and handle books themselves, and make their own meanings. It is in sharing books with adults and talking about them as they read that children learn to bring the knowledge they have of the world to the meanings being made in text. (Heath, 1983, Cochran-Smith, 1984, Dombey, 1986).

Just as children need to 'read' before they can read so they need opportunities to make their own meanings in writing - even before they can write. One of the great values of allowing children to invent writing and spelling on the way to learning to control written language is that the meanings they try to make are rooted in their own experience just as they are

when talking. In other words they are quite clear about what they are trying to do. They become aware of the purpose and function of written language in their own lives and the life of the community.

It seems that, like talk, written texts grow out of stories, and events in children's lives, and the ongoing life of the classroom. They write about these events in ways similar to the way they talk about them. Holdaway, (1986) reminds us that

> ...young children maintain cognitive clarity by an uncompromising closeness between concrete operations in the real world and their language development. Their style of learning is concrete and demands 'hands-on' interaction with the real world. Our task is to help them see a reflection of those forms of intelligence in the visual display of print.
>
> p.92

This is more likely to happen in communities with their own significant purposes for reading and writing.

Early Literacy in the school Community.

I said earlier that informed opinion suggests that problems of underachievemtnt relate to lack of particular kinds of experience, discontinuity between school and home, and linguistic and cultural diversity. Since children enter school when they are five years in Britain, and one or two years earlier if they go to nursery school, only the most pessimistic could think all was lost, that it was too late to prevent under-

achievement dogging some children's school lives. If children need to extend their experience of life - and what 5 year old does not - then it's not beyond our wit to create school conditions that build in not only rich first-hand experience, but also the talk, the interaction, opportunities for play, including dramatic play, and the time and means for children to represent their experience in a variety of ways. For that is how real learning occurs and where literacy learning is most powerful.

Why can't the literacy programme for emergent readers be built round stories, hearing stories, telling stories, playing out stories, pretending to read stories, (Holdaway's reading re-enactment) telling stories about their friends, their everyday lives, creating stories about anything under the sun. Wells comments that "making sense of experience is to a very great extent being able to construct a plausible story about it". The stories read and told to children in turn make them better able to tell their own. Narrative is, according to Hardy (1968) 'a primary act of mind', the way we represent experience to ourselves.

Through literature children hear a variety of different kinds of discourse including stories, dialogue, description, play with words, rhymes and rhythms. They hear the 'tune' of language used in different ways. They become familiar with written

dialect in oral form, with vocabulary to do with feelings, images, story characters such as kings and queens, witches and ogres, hens and foxes, poor heroes and rich villains. They become aware of the conventions of literature and expectations for the shared symbolism writers expect of their implied readers. In the intonation of the reader, which they take on themselves as they first 'read' and later really read they get acquainted with the way words go together, the significance of how particular words are used, e.g. sobbing bitterly, meeting the dragon bravely.

Children learning English as a second language begin to use English to make meanings they know to be there. The repetition of stories, playing them out, the dialogue that accompanies story reading enables all children to learn to take meaning from written language. They become aware of cause and effect, behaviour and its consequence. They learn to predict both language and events in stories.

Children slower in learning to read and write may well not be slower learners - many of them are extremely competent in managing their own lives and affairs - just low on experience and understanding of books and all that means in terms of further literacy learning, And schools can certainly do something about that. Cultural and linguistic differences can

be recognised and supported similarly. Stories from a variety of different cultures need to be part of every child's repertoire, and children from different cultures need to see themselves, their culture and the lives they are living reflected in the books they read. They too, enjoy hearing stories many times, and make them their own through dramatic play and in a variety of art forms. We hear the influence of stories in their retellings as in the following example of 6 year old Yvonne who is Afro-Carribean:

> Once upon a time there was a mother. She bore a beautiful baby. She used to call her baby but now she call her Snow-White.

And 7 year old Deba, whose first language is Bengali:

> When Snow-white growed up she had nice mouth and everything.

And Mammun, also a Bengali speaker who was reading Titch, a story he knew well. He read:

> Peter had --- big dig. (The text was, Pete had a big spade).

A week later he read:

> Peter had a big spade.

If we based our literacy programme on

- up-to-date knowledge of the processes involved in reading and writing, and
- what we know of early literacy events that make a successful entry into reading and writing for many children -

What might it look like?

EMERGENT READING

- Children build up a repertoire of books and stories.
- bridge spoken and written language.
- explore environmental language.
- develop concepts of print.
- try 'reading and writing' themselves.
- get to know some words and letters.
- develop a literacy set.

Reading aloud is central to the programme. The book provision, assembled in an attractive book corner, or accompanying current collections and displays, reflects the children's interests and concerns, houses books shared and stories told, and encourages personal reading and enjoyment of books.

Enlarged texts make it possible for teachers to share and explore books and stories with larger groups of children than the one or two a parent may read to at home. As teacher and children enjoy reading a Big Book together they can explore the meanings made in the print and in the pictures. The books remain instantly available for children to read alone or with friends, with smaller versions to read at any time, any place, including with parents at home. The amount of engagement with text increases hundreds of per cent. Clay (1979) documented the minimal amount of reading slower learning children did in school. Since their basic problem is likely to be due to lack of experience with books rather

than their rate of learning, they are certainly not being helped when such limitations continue in schools, where reading can happen only with the teacher and often then, in minimal books. Where teachers understand that parental involvement is a major force in children's learning they build links with the community and parents and become partners in the teaching enterprise. Children choose to take home books for parents to read to them, and stories they know how to read with their parents. The degree to which organised parental support increased the level of successful reading for many children is well documented in the Haringey Report (1980).

Writing

The model includes a number of text-making opportunities varying from the child's own attempts to children and teacher working together in collaborative shared writing to produce their own books. Each has its own possibilities and strengths which together add up to a rich experience of writing.

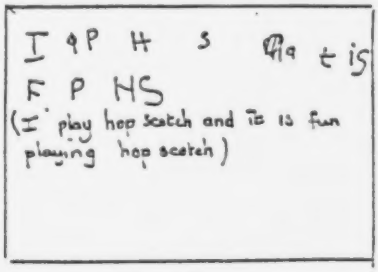
Individual Writing

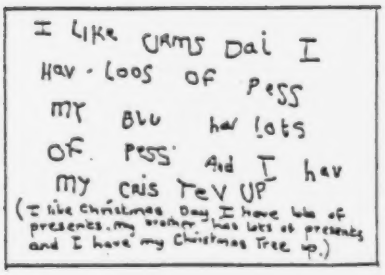
Children use written language functionally, just as they do spoken language. It serves their purposes for labelling, making lists e.g. shopping lists, giving instructions, e.g. 'Don't touch' on their models, and "Dear Mom, its your turn to clean up" on the frig. door. And for warnings: a child-written notice in one classroom reads, "If you don't want a cross teacher you better push the coat trolley in!"

They make statements about important events in their lives at home and at school

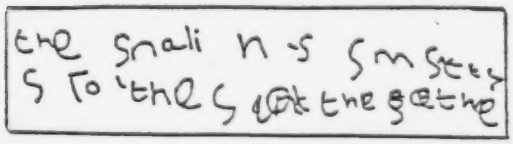
e.g. I went to the zoo

They add comments

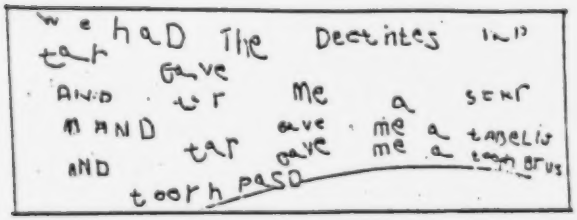



I like CRMS Dai I
Hav · Loos of Pess
mY BLu hav lots
of Pess Aid I hav
my CRis Tev UP
(I like Christmas Day I have lots of presents. my brother has lots of presents and I have my Christmas Tree up.)

Texts grow out of the ongoing life of the classroom

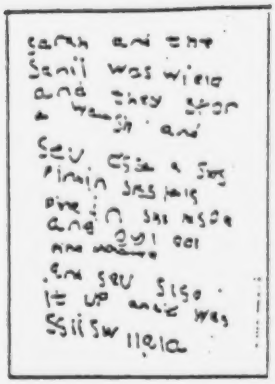


The snail has so much suction they stick to the sides and stay there.



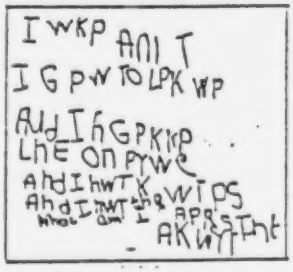
We had the dentist round they gave me a sticker and they gave me a tablet and they gave me a toothbrush and toothpaste.

Stories too are written -



Sarah and the snail was walking
and they saw a witch and
she cast a spell.
Put in spiders legs
Put in spiders head and
Put in spiders eyeballs
Put in spiders mouth
And she stirred it up
and it was stewed legs.

And from the same class of 5 year olds in their first term in school, where riddles were in vogue, one child wrote -



What am I?
I've got two leaves
And I have got lots of petals
And I have got white petals
And I am yellow in the middle
What am I?

It seems that, like talk, written texts grow out of stories and events in children's lives, and the ongoing life of the classroom. They write about them in ways similar to the way they talk about them.

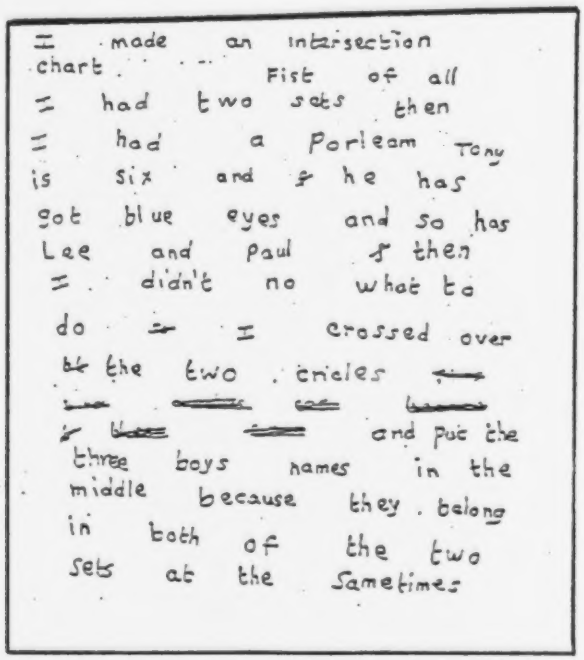
Curriculum related writing

In a lively classroom part of the dramatic play and activities reflect life in the community. Children create cafés, hospitals, job centres, home-corners, flower shops etc. They need writing to record patients, describe symptoms, display menus, advertise, and so on.

In such dramatic play children take on roles, they use a range of spoken and written language, but writing is subsidiary to the main goal - running a successful café, keeping check of the patients and so on. Speech comes and is gone. The assimilation of visual language into functions in use of written language, provides new and powerful ways of holding on to ideas,

the possibility of referring back, of adding to information/ideas already expressed.

Writing serves similar purposes in mathematical activities. In the following example 7 year old Winston was collecting and organising information about his classmates. His account reveals that he met a new problem in having to decide what to do with data that didn't fit neatly into his two sets.


I made an intersection
chart. Fist of all
I had two sets then
I had a Porleam Tony
is six and he has
got blue eyes and so has
Lee and Paul then
I didn't no what to
do I crossed over
the two circles
and put the
three boys names in the
middle because they belong
in both of the two
sets at the Sametimes

It is interesting that he begins his account with the final product - an intersection chart - and then uses writing to reflect on the process, the nature of the problem and how it was solved. Winston was obviously on the edge of his learning, the 'zone of proximal development.' (Vygotsky). The nature of the task, striving to cope with the problem he met, exploring it in collaboration with his teacher and peers, made new demands on his language, pushed his thinking on, and opened up new mathematical understanding.

We should assume that a most fundamental aim of education is to raise the level of children's intellectual functioning and to enable them to interpret and reflect on first hand experience, Winston's experience helped him to do this. In the following example, you can see how a group of nine year olds used the data relating to the classroom guinea pig,- collected and recorded over a period of time, to predict the likely number and weight of the litter Miss Shaggy was due to produce.

Miss Shaggy has had four litters in the past, the first litter she had was three Babies the second litter she had there was one baby the third litter she had 3 again and the fourth was still 3. The last litter Sally recorded and the weight of the first baby was 120 grams the weight of the second baby was 110 grams the weight of the third baby was 100 grams so it goes down in tens. If Miss Shaggy has three babies I think the first baby she has will weigh 150 grams and I think the second baby she has is going to weigh 160 grams and I think the third baby is going to weigh 170 grams. If we add up 150, 150 and 170 the answer is 480 the other 20 grams is I guess the weight of the fluid and milk which is food for the babies.

(10 years)

(1)
```
  31
 1,400
 1,270 -
 -----
   130 grams
```

Anthony hill weighed Miss Shaggy on Friday and she weighed 1,270 grams. I weighed her today and she weighed 1,400 grams so in four days she's increased by 130 grams.

(2)
```
  1
 1,400
   900
 -----
   500 grams
```

I weighed miss Shaggy today and she weighed 1,400 grams. Her usual weight is 900 grams. So I took away 900 grams from 1,400 grams and the answer was 500 grams so she has increased 500 grams during pregnancy.

```
3|500
 166 r 2
```

I took the number above, 500 and I divided it by 3 I divided it by three because miss Shaggy might have three babies and the answer is supposed to be the weight of the first baby.

The children explored the data, and then in words and mathematical notation, worked out their predictions. They were delighted when the babies

were born to find that their predictions were quite close, and then to add their findings to the already recorded data.

There are examples of what Wells * calls epistemic learning. Wells argues for a reconceptualising of literacy, noting that much school learning, manifest in forms of writing, operates at lower rather than higher levels of thinking. Wells * identifies four levels -

1. Performative - that is speech written down. The focus in on the code with little need for composing. Copying, filling in blanks would come in this category.

2. Functional, that is being able to write pre-formulated types of writing such as reports, school essays, story-retelling. Much school writing is of this type. For example -

I went to the zoo. We got on the bus. We saw elephants, tigers and monkeys. Then we went home and had our tea.

3. Instrumental, that is writing as transmission without much concern for transforming, putting together facts read or told in lessons.

4. Epistemic, writing in which what is known is extended and reformulated. Critical thinking and evaluation are called for, and experience and thinking become knowledge owned by the learner. Writing and other forms of representation through which children

* Speaking at the Ottawa Conference, 1986.

internalise learning come into this category.

Bereiter sees these levels as developmental, but notes that some ways of teaching - helping children learn - allow young children to operate at an epistemic level. Wells thinks that schools should take responsibility for enabling children to learn at an epistemic level throughout their school lives. The examples given above demonstrate how such learning is already happening in some schools. Helping children learn to read can also be done in ways that raise the level of their thinking and understanding of written language. We might take note of Donaldson's (1978) insights -

> Once the teaching of reading is begun, the manner in which it is taught may be of far-reaching significance. ... the PROCESS of becoming literate can have marked - but commonly unsuspected - effects on the growth of mind. It can do this by encouraging highly important forms of intellectual self-awareness and self-control.
>
> p.97

Children's reflective awareness is enhanced by the feedback we give them, for example, when we respond first to the message in their writing, and, as appropriate, reflect back to them their growing knowledge of the orthography, the written language system itself. We get glimpses of the way they are internalising ideas, of their inner speech in the following examples from children in their first year in school.

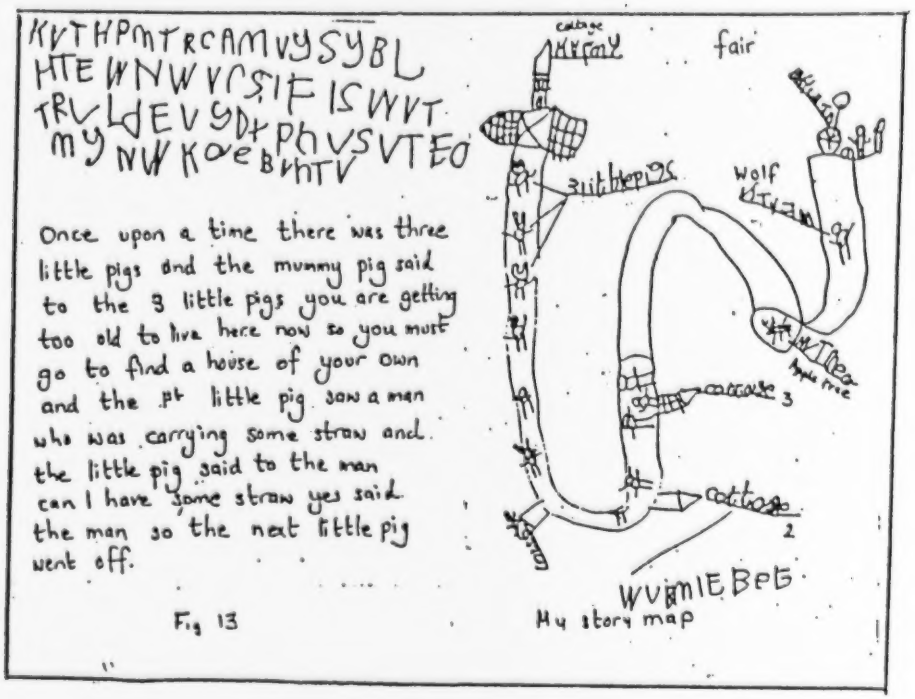

Once upon a time there was three little pigs and the mummy pig said to the 3 little pigs you are getting too old to live here now so you must go to find a house of your own and the 1st little pig saw a man who was carrying some straw and the little pig said to the man can I have some straw yes said the man so the next little pig went off.
fair
cottage 3
cottage
2

Fig 13 My story map

Karl, just six, has written part of the story and it is possible to discern the beginnings of his use of the alphabetic principle. He told - rather than read - what he had written to his teacher who wrote it down. He then made the accompanying story map setting out the events in the pigs' lives, and the inducements offered by the wolf to lure them into his power.

Similarly, Sarah, almost six, has written part of Little Red Riding Hood, and made her story map. In talking with her she pointed out the cloud in the sky, and the sun and the forest. She explained the dark patch in the picture as the shade created when the sun went behind the cloud, and why the path disappeared from view. This, in her view, was why Little Red Riding Hood

didn't see the wolf, but he could see her. It seemed that the picture map represented Sarah's inner speech, her image and reasoning about the events that made the story make sense to her.

Dramatising and playing out stories also enables children to make stories their own. They get enormous enjoyment from taking them further sometimes turning the original on its head.

This happened with 'Mrs.Wishy-Washy' a martinet of the farmyard who demanded that her animals should be clean. 'In the tub you go!' was her cry to the mud-caked animals in the farmyard.

In the new story created by the teacher and a group of 6-7 year olds in shared writing sessions, Mrs. Wishy-Washy scrubs the distinctive features off a number of animals - the crocodile lost his teeth, the skunk lost his smell - and so on. But what happened when she got to the elephant?

Mrs Wishy-Washy saw a dirty elephant.
She screamed, 'You dirty old elephant.
You need a bath. In the tub you go.
The elephant tried to get in the tub
but..
He crushed it.
His filled his trunk with
dirty, muddy water and looked at
Mrs Wishy-Washy with his little eyes.
He lifted his trunk and waved it about.
He SPRAYED Mrs Wishy-Washy.
And all the animals said,
'In the tub you go!'

You can imagine the fun they had composing and illustrating this story and their delight in reading it over and over to anyone who would listen. Their teacher pointed out that the children drew on many experiences in writing the story, their knowledge of how such a story is organised and how it evolves, and their experiences with animals, real ones and those met in books and stories.

In all the examples given, children use what they know, extend and reformulate their knowledge in a variety of ways and so make it their own. Piaget calls this accommodation, the forming of new schemes that will assimilate new learning.

Summary

Problems of underachievement in literacy could be tackled if we applied intelligently the knowledge we now have of

- the processes involved in reading and writing
- the kinds of early literacy experiences that seem to make for successful entry to literacy
- the value of intellectually challenging teaching at all levels

If our concern for underachieving children is real we would set our minds to

- examine our practice at the beginnings of school and create conditions and programmes that allow a point of entry to children from different social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds

- move away from trivialising literacy by reducing it to skills learning, and improve the quality and the range of books and stories offered to children
- provide more opportunities for children to transform, extend and reformulate ideas and experience

- become aware of children who after a years schooling have very little understanding of what is involved in reading, and find ways of helping them, e.g. through Clay's Reading Recovery Programme (1985)
- create literate environments in school in which children use reading and writing for most crucial and significant purposes
    - to share the community life of the school and home
    - to enjoy the personal satisfaction and understanding that comes from experience with literature
- stimulate children to find language and literacy of real value to them for reflecting on, organising and reformulating experience, and making knowledge their own.

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